

# Relationality and difference: Kierkegaard on irony and longing

Jørgen Steen Veisland<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

Søren Kierkegaard's work *The Concept of Irony* is an ambivalent and subtle analysis of irony with special reference to Socrates. Kierkegaard demonstrates how irony paradoxically makes its own method into an object of irony, a process culminating in a transgression of dialectics resulting in pure negativity. Moreover, irony is only a tool whereby the philosopher approximates the Absolute through indirect communication and explores the limits of language by contrasting it with music. The ultimate goal of this speculative, rhetorical procedure is to open up the aesthetic dimension to the ethico-religious dimension. This involves an emancipation of subjectivity entailing the subject's serious confrontation with existence as an ethically disposed interest, *interesse*, where the individual is in constant dialogue with her/himself. The dialogue in the individual self is propelled by longing, which may be conceived as an intensified mental force containing an erotic and religious core and manifesting the ever-present, immanent difference between self and other. That difference is emblematic of a psychological, moral and epistemological problematic indicating indeterminacy and relationality, the pivots of individual becoming.

**Keywords:** Socratic irony; Christian Eros; difference; dialogue; existential becoming

## Irony and relationality

Søren Kierkegaard work *The Concept of Irony* (*Om Begrebet Ironi*, 1841) is not only a dialectical analysis of ironic thought but an embodiment of an ironic mode of thinking that makes its own method into an object of irony, or into an ironic object. Kierkegaard accomplishes this sleight of hand – an initial example of the involutions and devolutions characterizing the self-reflexive aesthetic that is to culminate in the incognito of the religious subject – by contradicting yet also making use of Hegel's conceptual system. In his *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard and Barthes* John Vignaux Smyth states that Kierkegaard proposes to organize "the Platonic, Xenophonic, and Aristophanic conceptions of Socrates in a dialectical manner, with himself operating as the

mediating "third (*Tredie*) between each."<sup>2</sup> The ironic paradox implicit in this methodology manifests itself in Kierkegaard using Hegelian dialectics in order to show that Socrates' irony is a negativity transcending dialectics. Kierkegaard's work demonstrates a deliberate ambivalence in that it makes the method into an ironic supplement to the object proper of the method, i.e. ironic thought, thus deftly performing a determination of indeterminacy. Kierkegaard's determination of indeterminacy is not meant to relativize or deconstruct the Absolute Subject. On the contrary, the maieutic method establishes relationality, not relativity. Self-Other relationality is dis-covered by Kierkegaard's thought and becomes the

## Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking  
on art, philosophy and  
psycho-analysis –

<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

**Correspondence:** Jørgen Steen

Veisland, finjv@ug.edu.pl

**Section:** Academic articles

**Received:** 13 February 2019

**Accepted:** 25 June 2019

**Published:** 1 July 2019

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the authors' own expense.

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Veisland, Jørgen Steen.

"Relationality and difference:

Kierkegaard on irony and longing."

*Inscriptions* 2, no. 2 (2019): 34.

Copyright © 2019 Veisland. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

<sup>1</sup> Scandinavian Institute, University of Gdansk, Poland.

<sup>2</sup> J.V. Smyth, *A Question of Eros* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 103.



revealing medium of the Absolute. Dialectical thought and paradoxical irony are terminologies providing insight into an existence, an existential mode positing its own ethico-religious absolutes.

Socrates' maieutic method consists of questions possessing both a referential and dialogical dimension as they signify, in Kierkegaard's phrase, "in part the relation of an individual to an object, in part the relation of an individual to another individual." For Kierkegaard's Plato, "thought only answers insofar as it is questioned, but whether or not it is questioned is accidental, and how it is questioned no less accidental" (*loc. cit.*). For Hegel, the relation between word and meaning is dialectical, for Plato it is dialogical, thus containing an element of the accidental, a negative determination exhibited outside the object. Kierkegaard states that "one may ask a question not in the interest of obtaining an answer but to suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining" (73). A similarity between idealist and materialist dialectics emerges here, as materialist thought, as in Bakhtin and Volosinov, perceives understanding as dialogical in nature. Kierkegaard's view of language as dialogical is ahead of its time. The unknown – the Absolute, the Other, God – enters the known through indirect communication, through irony. The mixture of known and unknown is an epistemological parallel to the blending of a word that contains all meaning and a word that contains no meaning to be found in Socrates' discussion of virtue. Here Kierkegaard tells us that what Socrates said "meant something other" (50). Socratic irony accomplishes the alienation between word and meaning that is a prerequisite for the linguistic function.

The alienation of word and meaning is conducive to a state of longing that is never satisfied. Kierkegaard says that nature is "incapable of maintaining the concept" since "each particular phenomenon contains only a moment." Likewise history, for "each particular fact, though evolving, is still only a moment"; and "the whole sum of historical existence is still not the absolutely adequate medium of the Idea, since it is the temporality and fragmentariness of the Idea (as nature is its extension) which longs for what issues from consciousness as a repulse which looks backward, *per se* face over against face" (49). John Vignaux Smyth comments as follows: "Dialectic cannot overcome the gap between nature and history, or between the Idea and nature and history, for it always leaves a remainder that is here called 'longing.'" Smyth notes further that longing has an erotic and a religious dimension, as implied in the phrase "a repulse which looks backward, face over against face." Kierkegaard's Danish phrase is *Ansigt til og mod Ansigt* which suggest two lovers facing each other and which also contains a religious allusion, looking through a glass darkly. Looking backward anticipates a looking forward and nostalgia contains a future possibility. The face-to-face position suggests a mirror-like opacity that further underlines the estrangement of history and nature from the Idea. Smyth proposes that "there is an ambiguity – emphasized by the deliberately obscure and unidiomatic Danish – between religious and nonreligious categories of interpretation, not to speak of the ambiguity residing in the religious allusion *per se* (the famous "looking through a glass darkly" passage in the New Testament)." Much as I see his point I would venture the thesis that Kierkegaard, at this point, is working with a composite blend of the nonreligious and the religious that anticipates a similarly composite, striking blend of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.

Kierkegaard proceeds to deal with the world-historical validity of irony, saying about the past that it is justified "by demanding a sacrifice" just as the present or the new justifies itself "by providing a sacrifice". Kierkegaard concludes that there must be a sacrifice because "a new moment shall actually come forth, and because this new actuality is not a mere conclusion to the past but contains something more" (277). Kierkegaard's ironist "is also a sacrifice required by the world process" who is consumed by "zeal in the service of the world spirit" (278). Socrates is not tragic but has a playful attitude to his own death; his death has no reality and his irony is play. Of course, for Kierkegaard the ultimate justification of irony is that it emancipates subjectivity and reveals the Absolute. The essence of irony is negativity, not mastery as in Hegel, says Kierkegaard, now involving himself in a paradox since the Christian sacrifice implies a giving up of power and giving in to mastery, a religious mastery of irony, the negativity of negativity. Now Kierkegaard is talking about the absurd and the leap of faith that expresses a longing for union, persisting in the subject as an erotic desire that has been abrogated by the negativity of irony. Irony and Eros both create and destroy the longing for union, engaging the subject in an existential battle where Being is both determinate and indeterminate. Kierkegaard states that the result of this battle is "the indeterminate determination of pure being," adding "love is; for to add: it is longing, desire, is no determination at all but merely a relation to something not given." Likewise, he adds, knowledge may be defined as "appropriation, acquisition, for manifestly this is the only relation of knowledge to the known, though it is also possession" (83).

<sup>3</sup> Smyth, *Eros*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Smyth, *Eros*, 117



John Vignaux Smyth throws a critical light on the negativity and indeterminacy of irony in Kierkegaard, stating that “it is when the ironist is soaring highest aloft, closest to the blinding light of the sun (to vary the Icarus story) that he is most prone to plummet, the blinded and ironic victim of his own irony, to the level of those on whom he has been spying from such a superior elevation.”<sup>5</sup> This remark may or may not be intended to disparage Kierkegaard’s conception of irony; we may be sure that Kierkegaard would agree with the disparaging tone as he was no doubt aware of the possible social and political implications of his stance on irony, implications that were to be elaborated in a later age more interested in ideology than he was. I believe, however, that Kierkegaard himself fully anticipated criticism to the effect that his ironist was a lofty, rather aristocratic figure distancing himself from the common crowd. But Kierkegaard’s ironist is an epistemological conception, not an ideological one, and as I have noted above, the negativity of irony falls back upon itself, indeed, falls short, when it comes to sacrifice and the leap of faith. Irony is only a tool whereby to approximate the Absolute through negativity and indeterminacy. Irony must per force contain limitations – considered from the perspective of the wider scheme, the philosophical movement towards the ethico-religious – that it itself is aware of; otherwise it would not call itself irony.

Kierkegaard notes further that Socratic eros has an ironic dimension in that it, eros, is desire denied its fulfillment. The paradigm of irony might, in fact, be regarded as a *coitus interruptus* – the interruption of an allegory or figure of cognitive-erotic possession. The faculty of vision is particularly dubious in this respect as when Kierkegaard says about Socrates “sawing through” a forest of formations, and “when everything was ready, all these formations suddenly disappeared and his mind’s eye enjoyed a prospect such as it had never before seen” (215). But it is the youth, the students enjoying the “prospect,” while Socrates stands aside, observing them ironically. Vision is thus undermined by Socrates, paving the way for the faculty of hearing.

## Music and the limit of language

In *Either-Or* (*Enten Eller*, 1843) Kierkegaard’s pseudonym A argues that unlike Greek eros, Christian eros is represented in music. A explores the limit-relation between language and music by stating that “whenever language ceases I encounter the musical” and “this is probably the most perfect expression of the idea that music everywhere limits language.”<sup>6</sup> A asserts that music is an essentially privileged expression of eros in the modern Christian era. Sensuous eros, the immediate-erotic, is posited in a new sense by Christianity which excludes it from spirit. Similarly, Christianity posits music in a new sense by excluding it from language. Music is therefore the language of sensuous immediacy. A’s exposition of the Christian idea of representation relates to the immediate-erotic and to music and is expressed in statements like “the most abstract idea conceivable (which lends itself to artistic representation) is sensuous genius” (55); the idea of the “sensuous-erotic in all its immediacy” (63); and, “the immediate is really the indeterminate” (69). A insists on the relation to linguistic determination, a determination brought into the world by Christianity *qua* the ontology of the sense-spirit dualism without which there would be no representation and therefore no non-representation either. Without Christianity there could be no relationality as there would be no experience or even thought of linguistic limits. A argues logically that the most abstract idea is represented in the most abstract medium that is itself closest to being a language. Hence music is more properly called a language than the other nonlinguistic media. As I have noted, the Christian concept of language is predicated upon the body-spirit dissension and involves a negation of the sign. Thus the sensuous becomes mere instrumentality, and even music does not wholly emancipate itself from this instrumentality. Music is a medium on the border between language and its other. A’s concept of music and language seems to be involved with his concept of eros which he posits as a kind of non-representational mode, or rather, a mode of structured indeterminacy occupying a space at the very limit of representation itself. Beyond this limit representation turns into figuration, as in the textual erotics of Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* where he writes that “figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears in the profile of the text.”<sup>7</sup> Greek eros is the nonrepresentational null point from which all erotic potency is derived. It may be expressed in any media. By contrast, Christian eros has a representative, Don Juan, as A points out. However, the Christian sensuous-erotic is represented in music which is itself constituted as the excluded other of language. The musical eros of Christianity is transgressive in the semiotic sense also, and A’s account of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* throws representation into a kind of demonic indeterminacy

<sup>5</sup> Smyth, *Eros*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Either-Or* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 68.

<sup>7</sup> R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1975), 55-56.



as A distances himself from the visual media, insisting that the opera should be heard, not seen; he places himself outside the opera house while the music is being performed.

This position is further emphasized by Victor Eremita, the editor of *Either-Or* (*Enten-Eller*, 1843), who says that in the confessional the priest is separated from the penitent by a screen so that “he does not see, he only hears. Gradually as he listens, he constructs an outward appearance which corresponds to the voice he hears. Consequently, he experiences no contradiction.” Eremita notes that it is otherwise “when you hear and see at the same time, and yet perceive a screen between yourself and the speaker.”<sup>8</sup> A and Eremita’s priest are semioticians. They negate the visible and affirm language as a self-contained system. But irony doubles back on this position because irony rejects the visible not in order to affirm the audible but in order to destroy all mythical epistemology invested in the visible. When invisible systems like language threaten to usurp a power not granted to them by irony, ironic thought responds by letting the visible return: hearing and seeing at the same time.

What I would call the “neither-nor” of *Either-Or* involves the transformation of representation into figuration and the erasing of representational modes and genres. The figuration of indeterminate, transgressive states manifests itself in Kierkegaard’s multiple pseudonyms where his language labors to posit its own other. This other is spirit, but since spirit is metaphysical it is also indeterminate and approximate and absolutely different from language. Difference is both absolute and relational and thus in a sense the same. In linguistic terms irony may be defined as the effect of the immanent operation of the unknown (the different) within the limits of the known (the same). Irony undercuts itself as one ironic position contradicts another in a dialogical fashion. To put it this way: *Irony, ironic thought, now serves as the indirect communication of spirit.*

In Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* figure is posited as the third term of the hypothetical unity of body and language, in much the same way Kierkegaard posits spirit as a third term, i.e., by negating and affirming this third term simultaneously. Figure and spirit are transgressive – in Barthes’ words, “a kind of diacritical paradigm.”<sup>9</sup> Barthes comments:

Figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears [...] necessary to the bliss of reading [...]. Representation, on the other hand, is embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire [...] of course, it very often happens that representation takes desire itself as object of imitation; but then, such desire never leaves the frame, the picture; it circulates among the characters; if it has a recipient, that recipient remains interior to the fiction.<sup>10</sup>

The text of bliss is a text imposing a state of loss and brings to a crisis the reader’s relationship to language. Bliss is a play exceeding language and is thus related to irony. Bliss and irony become what I would designate as the immanence of metaphysical longing that has no representation in language. At the same time, bliss and irony are figures of this longing in themselves. Ironic and erotic discourse are figurations of an interrupted, indirectly communicated desire that manifests itself by involution only. However, the involution includes its own cancellation or negation. Thus it constitutes the opening up of potentiality towards actuality.

## Self, other and difference

In the process of opening up the potential towards the actual Kierkegaard places himself in the only other position available to him: outside his works, becoming a reader of his own works. This narrative distance is a maneuver by which Kierkegaard surrounds his works with silence. That silence is there to be filled and interpreted by reader response. Thus Kierkegaard achieves something more than a relativizing of his discourse: he makes it relate to, and relational to the contingency of accident and chance, thus creating a fictional emulation or repetition of the accident of existence, which is always seen by him to be absolutely posited or given. That which is absolutely given now emerges as a complex relation between Kierkegaard as writer and Kierkegaard as reader, “K.” as textual ‘I’ and “K.” as empirical ‘I’. Kierkegaard speculated at great length on who exactly the author or authority of his writings was. These speculations are formulated in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (*Synspunktet for mit Forfatterskab*) which he did not want published but which was published posthumously. While re-reading his writings Kierkegaard now comments on the function of Governance in his work:

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either-Or*, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure*, 55-56.



Yet in a more exact sense I must enter into the accounting the part played by Governance in the authorship. If I were to go out and say that from the very first moment I had an overview of the entire dialectical construction of the whole authorship [...] this would be dishonesty to God.<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard cannot define the source of his work and resorts to calling it Governance. His work manifests a surplus. The surplus designates the difference between self and other. The paradox of relationality emerges here in the form of a self-other dialogue that is both *an aesthetic and a logical prerequisite for the revelation of the Absolute* which Kierkegaard refers to as Governance. The relevant question to ask at this point is whether Kierkegaard is in actuality Kierkegaard or perhaps “K.” The aesthetic and the existential are inextricably bound together in his discourse, to the extent that it is superfluous even to ask that question. Kierkegaard remains both Kierkegaard and “K” (with the first name *Søren* conspicuously omitted). The paradox of relationality receives its impetus from the fact that in order to become oneself the subject must lose itself and therefore cannot be itself. Relationality in the existential sense is an absolutely given which precedes the aesthetic and rhetorical categories of textual ‘I’ and empirical ‘I’. Kierkegaard’s discourse derives its explicit and implicit complexity – its dialectic – from this relationality, far more than from any purely structural and rhetorical logic – the kind of logic that tells us that language as a system of signs is not mastered by the individual discourse.

Furthermore, even if we accept the notion that God is a super-metaphor for writing and that Kierkegaard aestheticizes his relationship to God in an attempt to draw the boundary between the religious and the aesthetic, we may not use this insight to minimize the significance of the existential paradox of relationality that constantly inserts itself in Kierkegaard’s writing, making his discourse an emulation or repetition of existence as an absolute condition dictating the co-extant loss and attainment of self. The aesthetic is a repetition of the existential *and* of the religious. The existentializing of the ethico-religious is facilitated by the use of fictional personalities, the pseudonyms. The “person” of the pseudonym enables the reader to become a “person” entering a dialogue, and dialogue is pervasive in the religious texts also. Moreover, a form of self-dramatization is invoked so that the self – in the speaker and the reader – is revealed to itself as its own other. The self is a self-and-other and a self longing for other. Longing may be transcribed into a relational intensity facilitating being-for-others and being-for-God.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (*Afsluttende Uvidenskabeligt Efterskrift*) one more paradox emerges. For reason and existence appear to be linked, yet they are also separate. Understanding is one thing, existing another. Existing is serious, speculation unserious. Thought has nothing to do with existing. However, when defining the limit between reason and existence Kierkegaard naturally thinks existence as different from reason so that the difference between them in itself becomes a product of reason. Moreover, reasoning becomes a prerequisite for the cancellation of reasoning. The believing Christian uses understanding so that he/she may believe against understanding; reason must finally break with itself. The absolute paradox is defined as and by the breach with thought.

Now the argument proceeds to examine the problem of existence itself. Existing is a problem of the existing person who is infinitely interested in existing. Infinite interest applies to the self-relation and must be the product of serious thought. Thought about existence is concrete thought turning into action. Action is an internal actuality in which the individual identifies with what is thought in order to exist in it. This is subjective thinking. Kierkegaard writes: “The one who is existing is constantly becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker continually copies his existence in thought and translates all is thought into becoming.”<sup>12</sup> Is a difference in thought, then, tied up with a difference in existence? Kierkegaard replies in the affirmative, claiming that there is a difference between living thoughtlessly and living as a person in an eminent sense, meaning living ethically, constantly being aware of the difficulty of existing and being conscious that one may always lose oneself. Becoming oneself and not becoming oneself are different yet the same in their difference.

Kierkegaard now states that existence has stamped the subject a second time so that an essential change has taken place in him. Initially subjectivity was truth but through the second accentuation subjectivity becomes untruth, an other. Now the self-relation becomes the problem. The difference between self and other is now endowed with its truly existential dimension: difference may finally be defined as a being between: interest, *inter-esse*, is that which comes between the subject and himself. This means that longing is intensified further *per* being a difference between the subject and himself. This leads to the conclusion that subjectivity is grounded in the absolute. If it was not grounded in the absolute it could not be absolutely different from itself. Nor would the subject enter the self-other relationality with passion of thought. The ethical is

<sup>11</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 124.

<sup>12</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 74.



engendered by the subject's knowledge of his own difference from himself. And, the ethical may only be communicated indirectly. Since the ethical is absolutely given, there is no object to be communicated. Instead we have figures and substitutions that we as readers may only relate to in a subjective manner, which is precisely Kierkegaard's intention. Through its function as a structured indeterminacy figuration is imbued with truth and untruth at the same time and is therefore the closest approximation to the absolute and to the eternal. Moreover, the self-other dialogue is pregnant with the paradox that the eternal enter a subject who is subject to time, just as the ethical enters the aesthetic.

## Bibliography

- Barthes, R. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1975.
- Kierkegaard, S. *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Lee M. Capel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965.
- . *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.
- . *Either-Or*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Lilian Marvin Swenson. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- . *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*. Trans. and ed. Walter Lowrie. London: Oxford University Press, 1939.
- Smyth, J. V. *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, and Barthes*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986.